

CULTURAL FACTORS IN ENGLISH CLASSROOM: REALITY AND THE IMPACT

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ABSTRACT

Learning a language means learning a culture. It is widely known that when people learn a new language, automatically they also learn the culture of the community even though do not learn it particularly. Consequently, understanding other culture can help learners to learn the language well. However, being successful in learning a new language is not the only goal for the learners.

Unconsciously, a new idea and environment could influence their perspective and even characters. One of media that can affect learners easily is a textbook which may consist of a lot of reading materials. English students at IAIN Batusangkar read a lot of words, sentences, paragraphs, essays, articles, passages, journals and other reading materials that mostly written by western authors that expose many terms, language and live style, and also opposite view. The students' need to know about English or American culture to help them learn English language well is a fact. On the other hand, their characters turn into more westernized and obscured their local culture is another serious fact. This article is written to describe the importance of cultural aspects; cultural awareness, the need of special attention on local culture, and the selection of appropriate reading materials to support the cultural issues in English as a foreign language classroom.

Key words: Cultural aspects, English classroom, Impact, Reading materials, Reality

INTRODUCTION

English classroom offers many activities for the students. However, it is more than just learning how to arrange good sentences in English or how to make a dialogue by using the language. The English language is taught and learned communicatively. It means that the students are brought to the situation where they can imagine the real one and finally be able to use it in their real life communication. In this step, learning English as a foreign language seems interesting and fun.

Moreover, learning a new language creates a different atmosphere. Beside the language itself, students are also introduced to the community, environment, and various issues dealing with the language such as how

the people talk to each other, their language style, the choice of words, and even life style which are completely different from their own. All of the things are called culture. It can be said that while learning English, the students also learn the culture. Actually, it cannot be ignored because the knowledge is basically helpful for the students to learn the language.

One of media that can facilitate the entry of the culture easily to the students is reading text. Students read various kinds of reading materials namely essay, articles, letters, memos, announcements, journals, reports, and so on. Reading the texts seems a window for the students to see another culture. Unfortunately, not all of the students can see the right objects. It is possible that cultural

shocked would occur among the students. Learning and using the new language itself is not an easy thing for them. Many things can confuse them such as the relationship of younger and older, teenagers live style, thanksgiving custom, etc. At this point, learning a new language needs a control and deep understanding about which aspects that should be come up to the surface.

Lipson 1983, Reynolds et al 1982, Rice 1980 Steffensen et al 1979 (in Porto, 2013) explain that culture becomes a variable within mental representations and is reduced to just one aspect of an individual's identifications: race, ethnicity or nationality and occasionally religion. Reading texts expose this explicitly and implicitly. Students' understanding toward the text depends on how good their English and how successful they interpret the culture described inside it. It indicates that cultural aspects are very essential and sensitive.

When reading English texts, students are expected to understand well what they read. The understanding is proven by recalling it. Recalling here is not merely remembering. The students should be able to explain or to reproduce the text by using their own words. Understanding about culture could help them much to do this. Whereas, the understanding of the cultural aspects of texts during EFL reading is not a matter of idea units present or absent in a recall, but a question of increasing levels of complexity and detail. (Porto, 2013)

Unfortunately, two problems occur in English classroom; the first one is a new language, and another one is a new culture. Two things should be encountered by the students at once. Experts explain that there is significant correlation between language and culture. They grow together and affect each other. Because of that, it is impossible that when students learn the English language, they could ignore the culture. Some language experts in Liliweri (2014) believe that a language gives a significant effect on how people think and observe the reality. The question is, is it the language that affect the culture or vise versa? From the explanation above, it can be said that a language is more than just a tool of communication, yet it plays

an important role in every aspects of human life.

Students in Indonesia learn English as a foreign language officially from Junior High School (Based on the newest curriculum). Some of them, especially for islamic school students start learning it from elementary school. It is assumed that they get involved in reading materials for years. By analyzing the textbooks used by the teacher and students in English subjects, it can be seen that the goverment realize the importance of cultural aspect in learning a foreign language. The names of the characters use Indonesian names, the stories mostly are about Indonesian culture and community. It is hoped that, while learning a new language, the students also learn their own culture. When it is explained and described by something which is more familiar, hopefully their understanding on the new language will be better.

This step also support the character education which becomes the main concern on Indonesian curriculum lately. One said that how could someone learn another culture wisely while he/she does not recognize and understand well his/her own culture. For Indonesian students, it is good for them to think globally but act locally. Eventhough they communicate in English, their character as Indonesian people still stay with them. Kartawinata in an article written by Makmur K (2014) explained that cultural resistance is very crucial in facing the changing and the influence of a new culture which could give the identity for the people without leaving their own characteristics.

Based on the explanation above, it can be understood that the choice of good reading materials is a must in English classroom. The problem becomes serious for higher level students, such as university students. At this level, there is no textbooks which are constructed officially for the English classroom. Mostly materials are taken from western authors. Not much choice can be given to the students dealing with the reading texts. Whereas, as islamic institution, IAIN Batusangkar also support local wisdom to be inserted into the curriculum. It means that, character education in primary and secondary

schools is not enough, even university level still concern on it.

The writer exposes cultural issue in this writing to figure out the importance of cultural awareness in language learning, the reality faced by foreign language learners, and the potential impact on character education. Hopefully, this writing can give beneficial effect to the students in learning English as a foreign language and also to the teachers and lecturers in using more credible and worthier reading materials.

THE NATURE OF CULTURE

According to Goodenough in Mudjijono (2014), culture is not a material phenomenon; it does not consist of things, people, behaviour or emotions. It is rather the organization of these things. It can be said that culture is the combination of many things that is reflected on the way people think and act. Step by step, people build their view of life to create a belief and noble attitude. These two things, finally, become the characters of the people.

Celce-Muria, et al (2014) in their book explain the meaning of culture as sociocultural norms, worldviews, beliefs, assumptions, and value systems that find their way into practically all facets of language use, including the classroom. The definition of culture indicates that it is not just about one or two aspects, yet it is viewed as a whole things that form a system. Furthermore, the experts divide the culture into two; visible culture (styles of dress, cuisine, customs, festivals, and other traditions), and invisible culture (sociocultural beliefs, assumptions). Visible culture is something real that can be examined directly, while invisible culture is the one that people are not even aware of and thus cannot examine intellectually. Both have different effect on language learners.

Beside that, Brown (2007) defines culture as a way of life, as the context within which people exist, think, feel, and relate to others, as the “glue” that binds groups of people together. He also states that culture can be defined as the ideas, customs, skills, arts, and tools that characterize a certain group of

people in a given period of time. It can be said that culture is the people themselves. Whenever students learn a foreign language, at the time they get something new that possibly completely different from their own. Good understanding on it will lead the students to the right way, on the other hand, if they failed to understand it well, their ideas of life can be changed too.

CULTURAL ASPECTS IN LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

1. Cultural Awareness and Teaching Culture

In foreign language classroom, cultural awareness is a crucial thing. Cultural awareness is people's understanding of the differences between themselves and people from other countries or other backgrounds, especially differences in attitudes and values. It is easy for the students to get something new, but, it does not guarantee that they really understand it. If they behave with something that they are not so sure about, they will do it wrongly which could give bad effect.

Kuang (2007) mentions four levels of cultural awareness; first level, people are aware of their ways of doing things, and their way is the only way. They ignore the influence of cultural differences. Second level, people become aware of other ways of doing things, but they still see their way as the best. Cultural differences at this level are deemed as a source of problems, and people are likely to ignore the problem. Third level, people are aware of both their way of doing things and others' ways of doing things, and they tend to choose the best way according to the situation. Finally, the fourth level, people from various cultural backgrounds are brought together to create a culture of shared meanings. Each level describes the change of people understanding toward themselves and others. When they experience the four levels, it can be said that the language learners come to a stage of “cultural competence.”

Culture can be inserted to reading materials. The purpose is, when the students

read the materials, they can learn the language and the culture as well. Because of that, book authors and publishers should realize about culture contents in any textbooks they write and publisher. University students, especially English teaching department students who are prepared to be English teachers in the future should concern about culture and have the knowledge when they study the language in university. It is hoped that when they teach English language someday as a foreign language, they do not just teach the language, but also the culture.

Lafayette in Tran (2010) wrote:

...it is hoped that universities will produce foreign language teachers who are better trained to focus on culture, and that publishers will begin to insist on a more systematic treatment of culture in textbooks. It is most important, however, that teachers begin to view themselves not simply as teachers of language but rather as teachers of both language and culture (p. 61).

The opinion strengthen an assumption that learning culture for university students is a must. It includes learning the target language culture and also the local culture. The knowledge and understanding on this can help the students have cultural awareness. Classroom teachers have responsibility to make culture learning more effective so that foreign language learners can hopefully be both linguistically and culturally competent in the target language.

In order to achieve the purpose of learning, teachers should know the best way to teach the culture in foreign language classroom. As it has been researched by some experts (Thomas, 1983, 1984; Hinkel, 1999), it is noted that there is a tendency that language learners use the foreign language in a culturally inappropriate manner. It is possibly happen because those students do not really understand the culture they learned which might be really different from their own. No matter that cultural shock would reveal, and they cannot behave appropriately. This problem becomes a crucial factor that need to be discussed further. Actually, it cannot be

avoided totally, at least the effect can be minimized. Teachers should find effective methods to maximize the effectiveness of teaching culture and minimize the inappropriate behavior of the students.

Teaching culture, directly or indirectly, is not simple. Celce-Murcia, et al (2014) state that the complexity of teaching culture comes to the surface because the language learners who engage in cross-cultural interactions are not aware of the indelible impact of the invisible culture which includes their own and other cultures on practically all social uses of language. Because of that, good understanding on a new culture that is brought by a foreign language is needed in practicing the language itself appropriately. Implicitly, the explanation above reveals the importance of understanding our own culture before knowing others.

2. Cultural Content in Foreign Language Classroom

To be successful in their language teaching classroom, teachers can set the cultural goals by classifying them into four categories based on Valette (1986), they are 1) developing a greater awareness of and a broader knowledge about the target culture, 2) acquiring a command of the etiquette of the target culture, 3) understanding the differences between the target culture and the students' culture, and 4) understanding the values of the target culture. To support the statements, Peterson and Coltrane (2003) state that cultural activities as well as objectives should be carefully and clearly organized and incorporated into lesson plans. These two authors even asserted that culture must be included as a vital component of language learning.

One point stated by Valette above indicates that when learners want to understand the target language culture, they should also understand their own culture. It means that reading materials or even textbooks they have in learning a new language may contain their own culture that can support their knowledge on it. It is very easy to find books or texts that reflect the target culture. However, it is difficult to find texts that reflect the learner's own culture. One of methods that

teachers can do for cultural understanding is by comparing both language cultures. If there is no adequate sources, the process of learning can not run smoothly.

In line with statement above, Alsamani (2014) in his article quotes that the inclusion of cultural content in language teaching materials for English language majors is essential to help students interpret and understand the target culture, to raise students' awareness of their own native culture, and to achieve communicative competence (Cheng, 2013; Baker, 2012; Zaid, 2011; McKay, 2010). EFL classroom should foster intercultural understanding to meet students' cultural needs and to ensure protection of their own cultural identity. Hence, EFL practitioners such as teachers should seek guidance to such effective culture teaching methods.

SELECTION OF APPROPRIATE READING MATERIALS

Reading materials should be chosen wisely. When the language learners read a passage or a text, they do not just learn the language, but also the culture. It is hidden inside the text, but easily can come up to the surface when the students keep in touch with it. To support the successful of the language classroom, the use of appropriate textbooks should be considered. Celce-Muria, et al (2014) describes that textbooks can be quite different in appearance from country to country. Textbook writer can be fully conscious of trying to realize a particular set of beliefs about language in a set of materials. It can be said that, different students need different materials of learning language, such as the reading materials.

Beside textbooks, authentic materials also usually be used in foreign language classroom. it can be gotten from some sources such as magazines, newspaperapers or internet resources. According to Richards (2001), authentic materials refer to the use in teaching of texts, photographs, video selections, and other teaching resources that were not specially prepared for pedagogical purposes. It is possible that, when choosing the authentic

one, the content is inaccurate and poor readability for the students because of the choice of the words and even unfamiliar context. Analysis of authentic materials should consider vocabulary load, expository style, and illustration.

1. Teachers' Roles

Teachers or lecturers and also students are the people who have responsibility to select the appropriate textbooks or reading materials to be used in language classroom. Friese, Alvermann, Parkes, and Rezak (2008) in their article identify several factors in the process of text selection that may influence the kinds of texts teachers choose for their classrooms, including teacher knowledge of texts, access to texts, and institutional constraints on text selection. They explained that it is very crucial for teachers to choose the texts that will be used in the lesson because it can affect students' learning, as these texts determine in no small measure to students' willingness to engage with certain kinds of knowledge.

Furthermore, the writers also expose at least there are two criteria of selecting reading materials or appropriate textbooks for language classroom, namely readability and content. These two aspects deals with text difficulty and its suitability for particular groups of students. The length of the text, the choice of words, students' interest and the effect of the texts for them become important factors that should be considered in the process of selection.

Another experts, Jacobs (2013) also explained the crucial role of teachers and students as well in selecting reading materials. He focused his writing on the selection of extensive reading materials. Basically, the selection of reading materials for extensive reading is similar to intensive one. That is why, in this writing, the writer considered this concept. In his article, Jacobs wrote that extensive reading materials are produced by learning communities. Learning communities are people who get involved in the learning activity and want to make a change for a better

learning. They are students, teachers, administrators, others working in and for educational institutions, family members of these people, and people in relevant organizations, such as government bodies, non-profit organizations, and private companies.

Jacobs then exposed that when teachers created reading materials for their students, some benefits will be revealed, namely: a. Right materials to read will help students to be good readers. b. Teachers know better their students and the curriculum than textbook authors, so the text selection is dealing with their need and learning goals. c. The materials chosen can be linked to the students' life and environment. d. Teachers themselves can improve their own skills, especially writing skill. The four things are only a part of the benefits that can be taken from selecting reading materials appropriately. The most important thing is students can get what they need and understand well what they read.

REALITY AND IMPACT OF CULTURAL CONTENT IN READING MATERIALS

It is true that, when learning English as a foreign language, learners can use the language with correct grammar but not appropriate in cultural side. For example, "thanks before" is often used by Indonesian students, but it is not familiar in English. It happens because in Indonesian culture, it is common to say "terimakasih sebelumnya". Actually, as long as the language is communicative and can be understood based on context, the use of such term is not a problem.

However, this writing does not simply focus on that issue. There is a fact that learners get easily blended to something new they got while learning the language. Unfortunately, they still can not use the language appropriately. For example, when learners read a text about thanksgiving or halloween, they become interested in it easily and there is a tendency or willingness to know more and even experience it. However, when they are asked to explain it in English language by using their own words, many of them get

difficulty to do it because their ability on the language is not as good as the new information they got.

Learning culture is helpful to learn the language itself. But, learning something that far from the students' environment and experience make them face two problems at the same time; learning a new language, and learning a new culture. So far, students' ability in English is not really good. After reading a text or material chosen by themselves or teachers, they still cannot express their understanding in good language whether spoken by retelling it or written by writing summary. Sometimes, the cultural aspects such as life styles, ideas, customs of the native speakers come to the learners more easily and influence their life directly or indirectly.

Many reading materials can be taken from available and credible textbooks of reading comprehension written by some experts such as Kirn, Mickulecky and Jeffries, McWhorther, Harmer, Fry, and so on. Many aspects can be gotten by the learners from the books; a lot of tasks that can assess their language knowledge and understanding, and also new information about people around the world, especially American and English who are the native speakers of English language.

In a reading book written by Kirn and Hartmann (2007), it can be found 10 chapters with various and interesting themes of texts. First chapter has a text about education around the world, Mexico, Japan, Britain, and The United States. Chapter 2 is about a city life that is Curitiba, Brazil. Next chapter is about business and money which is completed by some pictures of business activity in Ecuador, Philippines, and United Arab Emirates. Until the last chapter, the authors expose many stories and information about many things, many people, many ethnics, and various life styles. However, nothing is about Indonesian. Ecuador is not the native speakers of English, nor Brazil or Philippines. It indicates that any cultures can be learned when learning a new language such as English. If learners get too much about others, it is worried that they do not understand their own language. If they do not have good understanding on their own,

how can they understand others well and have good cultural awareness.

Facts show that learning culture is a particular activity when learning a foreign language. Culture cannot be ignored and the way to teach it in language classroom should be thought seriously by teachers. One of the way is by selecting appropriate reading materials that expose Indoensian culture and western cultures that managed orderly to reach the purpose of the learning. As it is explained by Jacobs (2013), when students read the right reading materials, they can be good readers. Good readers mean they understand what they read and learn from it.

CONCLUSION

Learning a language cannot be separated from learning a culture. Many educators argued that it is almost impossible to teach a language without a culture. Teachers have responsibility to be the mediator between language and culture. One of the ways that teachers can do is by choosing the appropriate reading texts for the students. Reading activity is an easy entrance for the culture. While learning a new language, learners also learn a culture. Both aspects support each other. Culture as it is defined by some experts is not a single thing. It consists of ideas, tools, behaviour, values, and things that form a system of people' life. Culture can reflect a community. In learning a new language, learners should have cultural awareness which influence them not only in the use of the language, but also to behave it. Because of that, reading materials should be selected by considering not only the linguistics aspects, but also the cultural content that will support the better understanding of the target language and their own cultural identity.

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